Amritlal Thakkar:
A Gandhian "Intervention" in the "Tribal Question"
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Wednesday, March 4 / 4:00 pm / 3041 Humanities and Social Sciences Building

Debates on the "tribal question" constituted an important part of intellectual politics during the late colonial period in South Asia, especially during the decades leading to the Partition and Independence in 1947. Present-day "reservation" (affirmative action) policies for the "Scheduled Tribes" owe much to these debates. The "tribal question" was framed as a question that attempted to resolve how the British colonial government, and later the post-colonial Indian government, should engage groups of tribal communities that live in geospatially and socially marginalized conditions. This talk provides a critical analysis of the role of Amritlal Vithaldas Thakkar as an important interlocutor in these debates. Thakkar, a Gandhian activist, was hailed by many of his contemporaries as an exemplary champion of social service to the depressed castes and tribal communities. His intellectual battles with two other prominent figures—Bhimrao Ambedkar and Verrier Elwin—served to crystallize the problems of framing "indigeneity" in nationalist formulations. It also brought to light the inherent tensions involved in the politics of representing Adivasis, or "aboriginal tribes," on the one hand, and Dalits, or "untouchables," on the other. Although these intellectual debates were based on essentialist definitions of religion, culture, and civilization, they gave rise to methods of representation that greatly influenced the post-colonial state's policies with regard to subaltern communities.

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